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Pilgrims: The MacDonalds and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*

Rachel Johnson

In this article I will look at the involvement, one might say entanglement, of the MacDonald family with John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress Part II*. Over a period of twelve years they performed a dramatised version of the book written by George's wife, Louisa.

My interest in this particular aspect of MacDonald's life developed gradually. Some time in the early 1980s I met Freda Levson, the niece of George MacDonald's youngest daughter, Winifred. On the second occasion she told me that under the bed where I slept was the costume worn by George MacDonald in the character of Greatheart, together with the remains of the curtains used as stage scenery. (Remember, never stay in a home in England without investigating the treasure under the bed. We rarely have enough room to store such "stuff" properly.) Freda and I pulled the costume and curtains out. Showers of "chain" from the costume chain mail cascaded onto the floor. We held up the curtains and found the bottom in shreds. Several years and several hundreds of yards of thread later, the costume can be seen on display in the Brander Library and Museum at Huntly.

My interest grew as the costume and the curtains became whole again and, aided by notes made by Muriel Hutton, I set out to explore more aspects of the MacDonalds' unique venture.

The performance schedule on the chart gives a clearer idea of how the itinerary was distributed than could a list of venues. They range over England and Scotland with some performances in Italy. *The Pilgrim's Progress*

[end of page 15] [Note: image not available] wasn't only something the MacDonalds acted over a period of twelve years in literal form, it was something they lived: in a real sense it was a pilgrimage for them. The vagaries of their life together were often expressed as direct parallels to the trials met by Christian, Christiana, their children, and Christiana's friend, Mercy. This is expressed in small ways time and again, as for example when MacDonald wrote to Mrs Cowper-Temple, addressing her as "dearly beloved helper of pilgrims," or when he wrote to his wife from Italy in the autumn of 1877: "I have once or twice been tempted to feel abandoned—in this messy and struggling house But it is only a touch of the Valley of Humiliation . . . of the Hill of Difficulty

rather” (Sadler 254). Acting *The Pilgrim’s Progress* would seem almost a natural extension of a remarkably consistent family life, which was based on love for God and love of each other, for all the separations along their rather bumpy journey. We know from the biographers that *The Pilgrim’s Progress* influenced MacDonald from his childhood reading of it, and it could be said that all his work is concerned in one way or another with spiritual pilgrimage.

Before looking more closely at their years of acting, it needs to be noted that Louisa was the driving force behind the production. It has been said that when Louisa stopped producing babies she started producing plays (Moore 98). On the surface, her life from the time of marrying George MacDonald appears as a series of crises, all of which needed a tremendous amount of courage and devotion to weather, especially as the family grew to include so many children. In the drama, the Heavenly Messenger speaks to Christiana: “Christiana, the bitter is before the sweet. Thou must go through troubles, as he did that went before thee, enter this celestial city” (3). These crises were not always met by Louisa with the same rock-like faith of George himself. There were times when she felt that “God cares more for the lilies than he does for us” (Moore 98) and she could not always be so sure that “the dark still is God” as George expressed it in the entry for January 15 in his *Diary of an Old Soul*. She sometimes became despondent, especially when circumstances prevented the family being together, but nevertheless, through all the domestic preoccupation, illnesses and upsets, her courage remained firm. This was nowhere so symbolically expressed as when the family experienced the second shock of an earthquake in Bordighera in 1886. Louisa was seated at the organ in the English Church. Her response to the shuddering of the building was to pull out all the stops and play the Hallelujah Chorus.

The dialogue in Louisa’s text has followed Bunyan very closely wherever possible, reflecting the spirit of his writing sympathetically. The play needed nineteen characters and was made up of seven scenes corresponding to the stopping places. These stopping places are: Christiana’s house, Before the wicket [16] gate, At the door of the House Beautiful, In the House Beautiful, The same a week later, The Valley of Humiliation, The Land of Beulah.

There is a good reason, additional to interest in the MacDonalds, for looking at this subject. It comes from the *Dictionary of National Biography 1901-11*. Under the entry for George MacDonald, the contributor, having stated that MacDonald married Louisa Powell in 1851, continues: “She adapted for stage presentation a series of scenes from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in which her husband and children took part and the experiment led the way for later revival

of others, of old miracle plays.” If that thought were pursued, we would find that we have a lot to thank Louisa for, as the mediaeval mystery and miracle plays are now regularly performed in most of the cities and regions from which they originated, such as York, Lincoln, Chester and Cornwall.

Religious drama being a familiar phenomenon to us, this may seem an exaggerated claim, but it puts into context the climate into which the production came. There were initial problems in licensing the play. These were overcome in an unspecified manner which brings out yet again Louisa’s determination and character. Indeed, where this drama was concerned, she had a sense of mission which enabled her to surmount all obstacles. Greville MacDonald notes: “In the first place the Lord Chamberlain refused to license a religious play; yet, being above the law, my mother always found means for circumventing it!” (502).

The play was performed between the years 1877 and 1889. The schedule varied in intensity. The list of venues reveals that there were years when the amount of travelling involved and the number of performances given must have been a gruelling exercise in endurance. This was achieved with many of them frequently ill and the others not of the most robust physical constitution. On top of this, George himself gave lectures, tying-in the lecturing circuit with the performance of the play. He occasionally picked up theatrical engagements whilst fulfilling lecturing commitments (Hutton 11-12). The winter months in Italy must have been a welcome relief, particularly during the middle years and after the Scottish tour of 1885.

As is well documented, MacDonald and his family had close friendships with many prominent figures of the time. Amongst their letters and books we find references to the *Progress*. Even as late as 1945, Osbert Sitwell, in referring to his grandmother’s view of theatricals, records her making an exception by allowing *The Pilgrim’s Progress* to be played on the occasion of his father’s coming of age in 1881. Augustus Hare mentions one of the earlier performances in 1877. He comments that “Christiana (the eldest daughter) was the only one who acted well.” He does however concede that “the whole, effect was touching, and the audience cried sympathetically as Christiana embraced her children to go over the river” (Hutton 22). This performance was given at Lady Ducie’s and [17] would probably have been arranged with the help of Octavia Hill. Many performances were given in connection with her work amongst the London poor.

In a letter to Jane Cobden in January 1880, Lilia gives us an insight into the attitudes of those to whom the family played. She expresses herself in such a way as to indicate the climate into which the drama came: “we had a much

better audience than hoped for this afternoon, . . . people were wise enough to think this different from a secular affair” (Hutton 8). In this atmosphere it is not surprising that the views and reviews of individuals varied from the euphoric to the disparaging. The former can be seen in the enthusiasm of Lewis Carroll, who held the family up as examples of perfect clarity of diction (Hutton 21). A letter of October 14 1879 from Carroll to Mrs V. Blakemore, the mother of one of his child friends, encourages her to attend a performance. He writes:

The MacDonalds are old and dear friends of mine and *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a most graceful, refined and reverential performance.

Unless you object on general principle to all dramatic

performances, I do hope you will be able to go, and to take Edith.

The less enthusiastic type of response can be seen in an article by Laura Ragg, who writes “the team seemed to me wholly inadequate to a difficult task, . . . and I felt Bunyan’s great allegory had been travestied rather than popularised” (Hutton 22-23). Written by one who regarded herself at sixteen as “a sophisticated playgoer,” this review takes no account of the reception of the play by other sophisticated playgoers, among who were numbered Princess Louise and Kate Terry.

Other letters, particularly those written by Lilia and Grace, make clear how important the involvement of friends was to the venture, be it in the use of rooms, the distribution of publicity, or by personal invitation. By 1881, Lilia could write to her friend Jane Cobden telling her “many places are asking for us” (Hutton 8). Organisation was precise, and any enquirers received full details of charges, requirements of a venue, and time needed for pre-performance preparations. Details of how the production was mounted are often discussed in the family’s correspondence. An example of this is found in a letter from Irene to Edith Denman, who had made an enquiry on behalf of a friend: “Our charge for performing a short piece in a drawing room or garden would be 25 guineas. We can bring our own stage with us where it is required, but should want the room the day before to put it up in” (Hutton 3). For a performance at Mrs Russell Gurney’s, Lilia wrote to her mother: “the boys can begin to put up the stage before 11 on Thursday and the rehearsal could begin at 5 o’clock” (Hutton 3).

Although MacDonald became known as the player of “Greatheart,” it was his second son Ronald who first took the part. MacDonald himself first played it at Grosvenor House in June 1877, “on which occasion” Lady Troup records, **[18]** “Princess Louise was present” (Hutton 4). We learn from Lilia that in the initial performances her mother took three different parts (Hutton 4). Later on, names of family friends often crop up, as they came in to cover

illness, injury or absence. Examples are Kingsbury Jameson, who married Grace; Ted Hughes, artist nephew of MacDonald's illustrator Arthur Hughes and engaged to Mary; and Octavia Hill who came to the rescue in Harrogate when Grace was suddenly taken ill. Octavia's mother wrote of this last event to another daughter:

If you were to spend all your time from now till Christmas in guessing what Octavia was doing last Friday afternoon you would never guess aright. So I will tell you. She was acting to a Harrogate audience the part of Piety in the MacDonald's *Pilgrim's Progress*. On Thursday we had spent the day at Harewood, and on our return found Lily and Bob here waiting to ask if she would act for poor Grace, then lying seriously ill of haemorrhage at Ilkley. The rooms for the performance were engaged, and it seemed impossible to postpone. Octavia agreed and learned her part (eight pages) that night. (Raeper 351)

In later performances when other family members had "outgrown" their parts, some of these were taken by homeless children whom the MacDonald family looked after. It may be said that this constant hospitality and concern for others is a reflection of Christiana's words as she pleads for her friend Mercy to be admitted at the wicket gate: "My lord, I have a companion of mine that stands yet without, that is come hither upon the same account as myself"

In a letter to Edith Denman, Irene mentioned that the duration of the play was two hours and fifty minutes (Hutton 15). This agrees with times given on printed notices used to advertise the performances. Even these were not without their problems. Lilia makes reference to posters displayed in Matlock in 1880. She is not happy about changes made and writes to her mother: "The big posters are not at all nice, they changed the type of Pilgrims since we saw it yesterday" (Hutton 8).

Ronald MacDonald described himself as "stage carpenter and performer in ordinary to Mrs George MacDonald / Dramatic stage manager, prompter, pianist, dresser, property man etc. in extraordinary to everyone" (Hutton 16). In fact, the company managed with very few props. In the preface to the published play Louisa writes: "Except in the second scene, where a wicket gate and paling are needed, no scenery was used: the stage was hung with curtains of appropriate colour and design to each scene." Two of these curtains are now on display in Huntly. An interesting reference to these curtains is found in a letter to Louisa from Ellen Gurney, niece of Mrs Russell Gurney. After visiting the

family at Boscombe, where they were living in order to improve the health of both Mary and her father, she wrote: "I . . . seem to see you toiling away at the furnishings of Greatheart and Feeblemind, & causing great bulrushes and irises to blossom [19] upon your curtains" (Hutton 18). Greville also mentions them in his biography. Some in appliquéd design of birds and flowers were made "by my mother and her daughters" (502). It may be that everyone had a hand in creating the curtains, as some of the design was applied in paint. The painted or sewn flowers were occasionally supplemented by real flowers. Greville recounts that Miss Godwin, daughter of the Bishop of Carlisle, provided a dog-cart full of flowers for the land of Beulah (505). This performance is reviewed in the *Carlisle Journal* (Sept. 23, 1881, page 5).

Both Ronald's description of his numerous roles and the joint industry depicted here show a close working-together that can again be found paralleled in the drama. Charity says: "If you love not the same things, your hearts will be divided; and where division is there is no strength. Without oneness of purpose, love will not endure" (13). This "oneness of purpose" was particularly strong in the MacDonald family in times of crisis.

The costumes worn in the performances can be seen in photographs which have been preserved. The ladies were generally in puritan-style dress, the men in dress compatible with the period and in keeping with their character Mr Brisk: for example, appeared in cavalier costume. Some photographs in the family album show players in their parts. Louisa is shown dressed as Mistress Much-Afraid, Ronald as Feeble-Mind, Irene as Charity and as the Shepherd Boy, Winifred as Piety, Grace as Mercy, and their friend Alice Gray as Prudence. Photographs exist of George MacDonald as Greatheart, Interpreter and Evangelist. Characters who did not dress in the styles of Bunyan's time were Greatheart and the Heavenly Messengers. Greatheart appeared as a Crusader, in tabard and chain-mail. The chain-mail is made of a suit of finely knitted material covered in large metal sequins which caught the light as the actor moved around the stage. It is interesting that General Gordon gave MacDonald the chain-mail of a Crusader that he had found in the Sudan. This may be yet another instance of the family being identified with the roles they played (Greville 530-31).

The simplicity of the production added to the overall effect, summed up by Joseph Johnson: "yet all who came and heard and saw the rendering of the old story . . . went away feeling that no performance could be more unpretentious and reverential. Everything was subordinate to the real meaning of Bunyan's dream" (179). As noted above, this may not have been everybody's

view, but it does appear to speak for the majority.

It would appear that rehearsals for the performances were so much a part of the general activity of family life that very little mention is given them. Lilia occasionally refers to rehearsals, notably in a letter from Porto Fino dated April 1, 1879. This was a year after the death of Mary and less than a month after the death of Maurice: **[20]**

You will wonder perhaps, as we did at first, how we can go through it so soon after parting with our Maurice . . . but we thought we ought to try and are quite glad we did so, it has all come back to us with such force and truthfulness & fresh light as has made the rehearsing of it quite a help on along the difficult path of the real daily pilgrimage. (Hutton 19-20)

Greatheart expresses their position:

but now we must move forward to the next valley, which is the Valley of the Shadow of Death, a place strangely haunted with evil things We shall be out by and by. A light from above is our only light in this valley In this valley . . . no weapon is of any avail, save the weapon called "All Prayer." (17)

At this point, the borders of the play and of their lives were increasingly blurring into one another.

Though the last recorded public performance was in 1889, attempts were made to put it on later at Casa Coraggio. The loss of Lilia, the most naturally talented actress, in 1891, left too large a gap to ensure its success. The curtains used for so long as scenery were hung in the great room. Greville makes one short reference to the music used in the drama: "For music, there was a piano beyond with the actors' singing, and sometimes a violin" (502). Muriel Hutton has a few notes about the music:

Bunyan's songs "Let the most blessed be my guide" (Sc. 1), and "Blest be the day" (concluding Sc. 2) are set to tunes from *Popular Music of the Olden Time* by W. Chappell, F.S.A. In the House Beautiful a favourite Powell-family Table Song is sung, to music by Beethoven. Louisa has composed a melody for the Shepherd's Boy's song & she has also supplied piano notes to represent the Messenger's horn. Gounod's "O lamb of God" was sung by Christiana & her family before the Messenger appeared in Scene 1. Most appealing . . . is a . . . tune by C. Popham to Charles Wesley's "Jesu, lover of my soul," to accompany Christiana's imagined crossing of the river. (Hutton 19)

Despite the involvement of the whole family in the venture, Greville had some misgivings about his family becoming a troupe of peripatetic actors. As the eldest son, he was about to embark on his medical career and was never able to be involved from the “inside” as the others were. He confesses to “some anguish that mother and sisters should have to do these things, and that brothers should have their education interrupted” (471). He found the idea of performances for profit unacceptable, though he recognised the benefits of wintering in Italy. He found it difficult to enter into his mother’s sense of mission as the production drove forward. He also felt a sense of personal loss in that “the old peace and rest in the home was . . . made impossible by the exigencies of the drama” **[21]** (503), though he does concede that “the change of occupation may have been good for my father” (502). He qualified this by giving us the picture of his father correcting proofs “as he awaited the call for Greatheart” (502). Though obviously ill at ease in himself, Greville does take pains to record: “I dare not let any criticism of my own . . . detract from the truth that my mother’s interpretation of *the Pilgrim’s Progress* created a profound impression upon everyone susceptible to such spiritual art” (504).

The family’s sense of mission in relation to the play has already been mentioned. Louisa saw it as the pathway by which to help her ailing family. George’s part came to be seen by friends as a vocation in life or, in Greville’s words again: “part of my father’s mission in the world” (503). This communication of spiritual benefit grew in significance as the family journeyed through their own lives. Not only was there the yearly migration to Italy, but also their continual journeying round the country with the play itself. Their friends increasingly identified them with their parts, and incidents were increasingly referred to in terms of the play. Lilia, writing to her mother on April 23, 1877 after a visit to Mrs Gurney, concludes: “It was getting to the House Beautiful to see her again” (Hutton 3). “Irene,” Lilia wrote to Edward Troup, “goes sketching, straps on her back for all the world like Christiana’s bundle” (Hutton 24). Ellen Gurney wrote to Louisa on May 6, 1877 after her visit to the family at Boscombe, addressing her as “Sweet Pilgrim mother.” She sums up the lives of the family and their view of their many friendships and closes: “Farewell, sweet . . . pilgrims & may we meet again a little further on our journey” (Hutton 25). The response could have been from “Scene VII: The land of Beulah” where Matthew says: “For my part I see no reason why we should distrust our God any longer, since he has through all our journey, up the mountains and down the valleys, along the dark ways and into this light, given us such proofs of his love”

(18). And it was, of course, Greatheart who had led them to that point, as George MacDonald did so many of his own friends and fellow pilgrims.

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NB. All MacDonald family letters quoted by Hutton are in the Bienecke Library at Yale.